

United States - Exchanges on Strategy, Identity Politics, AntiRacism, Universalism

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Contents

- [The Trouble With Anti-Antiraci](#)
- [Identity Politics Can Only Get](#)
- [When a “universal” approach](#)

The Trouble With Anti-Antiracism

Movements targeting racial disparities aren’t distracting attention from class inequality — they’re part of a broader radicalization against American capitalism.

In the last half-decade, the US left’s political fortunes have begun to rise again, if only haltingly. Polls show widespread dissatisfaction over the state of American capitalism and millions threw their support behind a self-proclaimed socialist in the Democratic primary.

After forty years of decline and retreat, the Left is undergoing a mini-revival. This development has been driven by millennials, whose political awakening has unfolded through Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and, most recently, the Bernie Sanders campaign. In all of this, we can see the rise of a potential mass base for a left political program.

Yet if the past five years have highlighted the growing audience for the Left today, they also show the limits of that radicalization. In their inability to sustain high levels of mobilization, the gap between public sentiment and the Left’s actual organizational capacity and social weight is obvious. In the tendency for political debates to collapse into empty posturing, self-promotion, and moralism, we can see all the pathologies of a left that’s suffered decades of defeat and isolation.

In this context, the Left would benefit enormously from a serious debate about goals and political strategy. And above all, it could use a strong dose of materialism and a sophisticated class analysis, at a time when class politics are still relegated to the margins of political life and the academy.

Adolph Reed [[1](#)], a well-respected political scientist and radical public intellectual, might be figured to bring this kind of analysis to a wider audience. During the 1990s and early 2000s, his many pieces dissecting the pathologies of American politics, the steady rightward march of mainstream liberalism, and the role of the black intellectual elite in the post-Civil Rights era were essential reading.

These days, however, Reed’s focus has, in large part, shifted to what he calls “left identitarians” — an array of figures whom, he argues, seem motivated by a desire not to eliminate inequality, but merely to redistribute it in order to ensure diversity among the ranks of the elite. For Reed these forces represent the left wing of neoliberalism, whose commitment to a race-first politics reflects

their desire to join the ranks of an upwardly mobile black managerial class. In pursuing that endeavor, Reed argues, they discourage social movements from identifying non-racial sources of inequality, and from developing the kind of broad-based political coalition necessary to accomplish real change.

Reed includes Black Lives Matter under the umbrella of left identitarians. His arguments against BLM, and contemporary antiracist politics more broadly, rest on two main contentions:

- The politics of antiracism results in a tendency to misinterpret class differences as manifestations of “race.” The consequence is a pervasive misunderstanding about the causes and contours of the problem. Thus, Black Lives Matter, Reed argues, ignores the non-black victims of police violence and mass incarceration, excluding big chunks of society, including groups that are part of a natural constituency for left politics. With such a narrow base for its politics, BLM can never generate the kind of coalition necessary to mount a successful challenge to the American ruling class or its policies — in fact, it is an impediment to such a movement.
- The basic analytic framework put forward by Black Lives Matter, as well as by contemporary antiracists more broadly, of focusing on the disparities in things like poverty, health, or police violence between black and white Americans, forecloses class politics by implicitly endorsing inequality as long as it is fairly distributed between the races. This ensures that these movements remain limited to efforts to establish racial equality — an equal representation of racial groups across the rungs of class hierarchy. These movements thereby ignore economic inequality, and let neoliberal capitalism off the hook.

For those of us who share Reed’s political goals, it’s important to challenge him on both these points. We believe that movements targeting racial disparities are not distracting from problems of class inequality. Rather the focus on racial inequality leads movements toward confrontation with the market [2] — precisely because you can’t target the foundations of racial inequality without confronting the logic of class inequality in American capitalism.

Race, Politics, and Radicalization

The first thrust of Reed’s critique pushes back against the attribution of practically all inequalities to that nebulous thing called racism. This effectively reduces the root of these inequalities to attitudes people hold at a given moment in history.

If people with power, like cops and employers, are personally racist, then the institutions in which they operate will produce racial disparities. For Reed, this perspective arises from “the liberal race relations ideology that took shape in postwar American political discourse precisely as articulations of a notion of racial equality that was separated from political economy and anchored in psychology and individualist notions of prejudice and intolerance.” This aspect of Reed’s critique is largely correct and valuable [3].

Bill Clinton’s 1996 welfare reform bill [4] is a good example of the value this perspective can have in clarifying the political forces behind reactionary policy. Welfare reform was sold to the American public as a racist initiative. The stereotype of the lazy welfare queen, getting rich on government checks as others labored, came to stand in as the problem with welfare, and the motive for reform. The work of people like Martin Gilens demonstrated that this kind of racist coding was central to selling welfare reform [5].

Yet welfare reform was not pushed by American elites primarily as a way to hurt black Americans. For one thing, the bulk of people on welfare were white. If the purpose of slashing welfare was

simply to elevate whites above African Americans, this was a strange way to go about it. Instead, as Janet L. Collins and Victoria Mayer show in *Both Hands Tied* [6], welfare reform was promoted by low-income employers who wanted an even more pliant and desperate workforce. You can't understand the course of welfare reform if you leave out the political economy.

All the same, this example reveals some of the limitations of Reed's critique. If racism was central to selling a reactionary social policy that was ultimately motivated by capitalist class interests, shouldn't challenging racism be important in derailing class attacks? Though at times Reed seems open to examining the interaction of class interests and ideologies of race, his relegation of antiracist politics to "the left wing of neoliberalism" extinguishes the possibility that challenging the racism of the welfare reformers could have been an important part of opposing their overall project.

This rigid treatment of antiracist politics also colors Reed's misreading of the Black Lives Matter movement. It is of course true that "Black Lives Matter" is shorthand for a variety of organizing efforts, whose goals can sometimes be opaque. The protests of the past two years are hardly the first to focus on questions of police violence or racism [7]. And like many movements today, Black Lives Matter suffers from chronic volatility and organizational weakness.

But that doesn't mean that its impact has been negative or that BLM has been an impediment to the growing leftward shift in the United States. On the contrary, the radicalization around questions of class and inequality among those under thirty [8] has been matched by growing support for Black Lives Matter [9]. At this point, BLM has majority support among young white Americans.

In other words, Black Lives Matter has had a significant impact on exactly the same demographic groups that were most strongly supportive of Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign. Indeed, while overall black voters broke strongly for Clinton this election, under-thirty black voters, the same people most likely to participate in and support BLM, went for Sanders [10]. And rather than impeding the development of a broader socialist consciousness, it has been part and parcel with the same process that has facilitated that youth-led radicalization.

In his most recent piece [11], Reed acknowledges the Movement for Black Lives platform [12], but dismisses "many/most" of the demands as "empty sloganeering and politically wrongheaded and/or unattainable and counterproductive." Yet the platform contains many of the basic elements of the social-democratic program Reed himself supports — stronger rights for workers, public jobs programs, a higher minimum wage, stopping the privatization of education. Though Reed contends that BLM is little more than an exercise in "branding" by middle-class race brokers, the platform suggests that the movement is part of a broader radicalization around issue of class and inequality.

Reed's total dismissal of BLM, and refusal to engage even with the aspects of the movement that are in sync with his politics, does nothing to help advance a class perspective within the movement.

More generally, there is little evidence to support the notion that movements and campaigns organized around "antiracist" demands block the emergence of class-based, universalistic movements. In fact, the history of the American left and labor movement since the 1920s suggests the opposite is true [13]. Insofar as struggles for racial equality have gained traction, they have generated momentum for a politics geared toward the demand for "social equality."

None of that is to say that universalism, grounded in a deep understanding of class, is not central to a left politics. Universalism lays the groundwork for more encompassing forms of solidarity. That's why social-democratic welfare states — which tend to be more generous and expansive — also tend to be harder to attack. More people benefit from social protections, creating a larger constituency to block any rollback of social expenditures. Conversely, more narrowly constructed and exclusionary

welfare programs, like those built in the United States during the New Deal and the Great Society, are easier to cut back.

But to say that universalism is vital in politics isn't to insist on universalism at the exclusion of struggles framed in opposition to racial inequality. Instead, we can see fights framed in terms of racial disparities not just as a worthy struggle in their own right, but as an entrée to a broader left political agenda.

Misreading the Discourse of Disparity

Much of Reed's recent writing has focused on the question of racial disparities. The argument, which he has articulated along with his collaborator Walter Benn Michaels [14], is a fairly simple one. The attention lavished on racial disproportionalities in measures like wealth and poverty, or victims of police killings, serves to distract from the more basic fact that there is poverty in a rich society, or that police regularly kill poor civilians in a democratic society.

As Reed puts it, "the focus on racial disparity accepts the premise of neoliberal social justice that the problem of inequality is not its magnitude or intensity in general but whether or not it is distributed in a racially equitable way." While Reed, of course, does not deny that a racial disparity in poverty rates is unjust, his argument is that the focus on this disparity means accepting that the current level of poverty in our society would be just if it the percentage of poor Americans of each race reflected that race's share of the total population.

As such, for Reed, a focus on racial disparities ends up legitimizing the market — so long as capitalism's effects on poverty are racially equitable, antiracists have divested themselves of the analytic tools necessary for attacking it. Antiracism is thus a neoliberal politics, accepting the capitalist market as natural.

In Reed's argument, antiracist ideology is no innocent mistake by inexperienced activists. Instead, it is "the politics of a strain of the professional-managerial class whose worldview and material interests are rooted within a political economy of race and ascriptive identity-group relations."

As he says elsewhere [15], it "reflects the social position of those positioned to benefit from the view that the market is a just, effective, or even acceptable system for rewarding talent and virtue." For the black middle class, antiracism serves a real purpose, providing tools to ease its ascent up the American career ladder by condemning the exclusion of black Americans from boardrooms and country clubs, but never threatening the basic class structure on which this class's prosperity depends.

This is a strong indictment of antiracist politics. And there is truth to it, insofar as there is a black professional class selling a desiccated form of opposition to racism as radical politics, epitomized by figures such as DeRay McKesson [16].

However, we also think that Reed (and his collaborators like Walter Benn Michaels) misread the ideological terrain of contemporary antiracism. In fact, the relationship between the discourse of racial disparity and a challenge to the rule of the market is exactly the opposite of their portrayal. Ironically, this mistake arises from Reed and his collaborator's inattention to the very process they claim to study most intently — the relationship between capitalist accumulation and racial inequality.

Before getting into questions of political economy, however, it is worth assessing Reed's claim that the discourse of racial disparities reflects the dominance of the worldview of the black middle class. This seems unlikely. While these forces surely exist, and surely do attempt to hegemonize

movements like Black Lives Matter, there is a more parsimonious explanation of the dominance of racial disparities in the current movement's list of grievances.

As Reed himself recognizes, "the great cultural victory of the postwar civil rights struggle is that 'racism' is negatively sanctioned in American society. No one with any hope of claim to political respectability . . . embraces it." Racism is condemned in the official morality of the United States. Is it really any surprise that a movement against injustice in the United States would initially focus on those injustices which are violations of the nation's official morality?

This has been the course of protest movements the world over. In peasant societies, the myth of the good king misled by bad advisers was common in centuries of peasant revolts. Closer to home, the Civil Rights Movement [17] was initially committed to a conservative social vision, nationalistic and anticommunist, that was rooted in the ideology of the middle-class leadership of the black church.

When people first begin to move in collective action against the injustices that confront them, they almost always do so with ideological tools fashioned from their society's dominant ideology. It is only through the course of struggle itself that people begin to discard this ideology in favor of one they fashion themselves, a process epitomized by Martin Luther King Jr's radicalization over the course of the 1960s [18].

To explain the focus on racial disparities in the present antiracist movement, it is not necessary to fixate on the specter of middle-class misleadership. While this exists, Black Lives Matter is following the common course for new movements, focusing first on those aspects of the present society that clash most obviously with that society's declared morality.

Reed's argument concerning the actual ideology held by contemporary antiracists is also questionable. As he puts it, "the demand that we focus on the racial disparity is simultaneously a demand that we disattend from other possibly causal disparities." Because of this, Reed argues that contemporary antiracists would accept a simple redistribution of injustices like poverty, incarceration, and police violence along racially equitable lines, without any diminution of their actual magnitudes.

In light of the courageous struggles in cities like Baltimore [19], Ferguson [20], and now Charlotte [21], where decidedly non-middle-class protesters stood up to the police and national guard for days, it is doubtful that the political vision of movement participants is so sclerotic. People do not risk their lives just to tinker with the social order, just as civil rights workers in the South did not risk theirs merely in the hopes of registering some more black voters. Here, Reed seems committed to pinning antiracists to the most conservative possible interpretation of their stated goals, ignoring both the thrust of their narrative, as well as the logic of their actions.

For the sake of argument though, let's assume that Reed is correct, and that most contemporary antiracists really do want nothing more than the various social injustices to be equally apportioned along racial lines. Even if this rather far-fetched contention were actually true, it would still not commit antiracists to naturalizing the capitalist market. In fact, it would commit them to a program of redistribution more radical than any episode in American history since Emancipation [22].

To see why this is so, it's useful to reconsider the relationship between capitalist markets and racial inequality. One thesis — first developed by University of Chicago economist Gary Becker and espoused by Walter Benn Michaels — argues that capitalist markets will tend to dissolve inequalities in income that are not based on real differences in ability. Because employers are competing with one another to hire the most productive workers, employers who discriminate against black workers will simply be discriminating themselves out of potentially productive employees that their less-

racist competitors will happily hire. Because the competitors now have more productive employees, they will eventually drive the racists out of business. In this vision, capitalist markets work as acid on systems of racial discrimination, as capitalists' quest for profit leads them to throw unprofitable prejudices out the window.

While this account is correct insofar as capitalists are indeed driven to attend to their bottom line to the exclusion of whatever ideologies they may personally hold, it fares poorly in the light of history. Over the last forty years, the United States has embarked on a massive program of marketization, deregulating all kinds of product and financial markets and allowing market-distorting policies like the minimum wage or welfare to atrophy and wither.

At the same time, the unions' abilities to set wage scales other than those determined by the market has similarly shrunk, to the point where most workers' wages are hardly affected by unions. If the acid thesis is correct, we should expect to see racial inequalities lessen over this period, as capitalist markets are allowed to do their thing with more freedom from interference.

In reality, the most basic forms of disparities have not shrunk. Income inequality [\[23\]](#) between black and white workers has remained, and is today above mid-1970s levels. The inequality in wealth between black and white families has also widened over the past few decades. The same goes for higher-education access, as measured by the percentage of thirty-year-olds with college degrees. How can this be if, as Benn Michaels argues, "markets are good for producing an ethic of antidiscrimination, [and] antidiscrimination is good for producing success in markets"?

The answer is that the acid thesis is wrong. Capitalist markets frequently "lock in" patterns of racial inequality, and it is precisely through capitalist markets that patterns of racial inequality are reproduced over time. Just as poor whites are kept poor by a capitalist system that makes upward mobility extraordinarily difficult, so poor blacks are locked in by the same system.

Since historically, many black Americans entered the capitalist system by migrating from the impoverished South, where they had been agricultural workers, they entered the system poorer than their white counterparts. Once they were wage workers, they found the route to upward mobility blocked by many of the same forces that block white workers from climbing the class ladder. More of the black population started out poor, so more of it remained that way.

On top of this, there are many market-based mechanisms that disadvantage black workers far more than white workers. Residential segregation, for example, creates segregated social networks, where black workers are less likely to find out about a job opening from a friend than white workers. Their ability to escape a segregated neighborhood is thus constrained by their less favorable job options, and the cycle is locked in. Active racial discrimination on the labor market is also alive and well, as a number of studies demonstrate [\[24\]](#). But on the most basic level, capitalism's rigid class inequality means that people who start out poor will, by and large, remain poor.

If this account of capitalism as locking in patterns of racial inequality is correct, it has tremendous implications for how we evaluate opposition to racial disparities in things like wealth and poverty. Since it is precisely capitalist markets that are reproducing these disparities, it follows that the disparities cannot be challenged without challenging the operation of capitalist markets. Far from leading to a quietist embrace of the market, a concern with equalizing rates of poverty between the black and white populations leads to a direct challenge of market prerogatives [\[25\]](#).

Thinking about the matter more pragmatically, this conclusion is even harder to resist. Take seriously for a moment the prospect of equalizing wealth between black and white Americans. Currently, black family median wealth is about a tenth of white wealth. To remedy this gap, and

make the black share of household wealth equal to the black share of the population, would require tens of trillions more dollars going to black families, most of whom live either below the poverty line or in spitting distance of it.

The kinds of remedies that have been proposed for equalizing this gap [26] include things like lowering the tax-deduction cap on mortgage payments (which massively benefits the rich, who are mostly white), investing more in public education, raising the minimum wage, and making it easier for workers to join unions.

In other words, pursuing the policy implications of even the unrealistically conservative agenda that Reed imputes to contemporary antiracists leads one to precisely the kind of social-democratic policy agenda that Reed himself supports. Reed might complain that it would be possible to erase the racial disparity simply through transfers from the white poor to the black poor, leaving the rich sitting pretty.

But no one who is focused on the wealth disparity is proposing this as a remedy. Aside from all the obvious problems with such a proposal, it's actually impossible to equalize black and white household wealth distributions without downwards redistribution, as a result of both the sheer lack of assets held by most black households, as well as the intense concentration of asset ownership among the wealthiest white Americans.

Reed is correct when he argues that antiracists today don't spend nearly enough time thinking about either the basic policy goals for eliminating the wealth disparity or the kinds of strategy that will be necessary to achieve them. However, his accusation that focusing on racial disparities yields "a politics that lies entirely within neoliberalism's logic" is clearly not true.

After the Color Line?

Given all of this, it is worth asking why Reed so badly misreads the contemporary political economy of race. Looking at other recent writings of his, one answer that suggests itself is Reed's peculiar prognostication on the future of race in the United States. In a few recent pieces, he suggests that "entirely new race-like taxonomies could come to displace the familiar ones."

Reed sees the direction of contemporary racial structures as moving towards a racialization of the "underclass" more broadly, as very poor whites, blacks, and Latinos find themselves assigned a generalized racial identity associated with their poverty. At the same time, wealthy African Americans can avoid the oppression poor blacks face, while benefiting from the diversity initiatives in ruling-class institutions.

Reed has always prided himself on being ahead of the curve, but here, he anticipates a future that is nowhere in sight. The evidence of the persistence of racial discrimination against black Americans of all classes is simply massive [27], and it is telling that Reed never engages with any of it. At the same time, the white poor are not being racialized. While the immiseration of white rural communities across the country has led conservative intellectuals to turn a jaundiced eye to the mores and culture of the white poor [28], this has not led to seeing them as part of a common "race" as poor black Americans.

Rather, the elite view of poor whites seems to be returning to what it often was in the era before the New Deal, when the ruling class was perfectly frank in its evaluation of the inherent inferiority of white workers. Then as now, this is no way implied a convergence of position between the white and black poor in the country's ascriptive hierarchy of race.

For Reed, this account of the evolution of the political economy of race seems to undergird much of

the confusion that marks his recent writing. After all, if the poor of all ethnicities are increasingly being grouped together as a new race, and the elite is similarly becoming more diverse, the persistence of racial politics must be the result of crass race brokerage by the black middle class.

This story, while coherent, can only be maintained at the cost of a divorce from reality. All the evidence suggests that while, as Reed says, things have indeed improved for many African Americans as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, contemporary capitalism continues to lock in patterns of racial inequality that result in blacks maintaining their familiar position in the American hierarchy. This is the true wellspring of antiracist politics in the United States today.

The Banner of Class and Race

Nearly seventy years ago, the Trinidadian Marxist C. L. R. James [29] wrote that “the independent Negro movement is able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation, despite the fact that it is waged under the banner of democratic rights.” James was referring to the declared aims of many of the movements for black equality of his time, which were mobilized on behalf of basic, apparently non-radical goals of equal citizenship.

Yet what James saw in these struggles was that the course of their development tended to take them well beyond the bounds of their seemingly moderate goals. Then as now, the struggle for the basic rights promised by the nation’s official ideology brought the black movement into conflict with the forces of American capitalism.

Adolph Reed’s recent analysis, unfortunately, stops where James begins, with the apparent political moderation of demands for black equality. Because such demands are, at least in principle, compatible with a system of vicious class exploitation, Reed believes that movements based on these demands are destined to do little more than shore up the basic system of class inequality.

We disagree. Racial inequalities are reproduced primarily through the market itself, so there is simply no strategy of confronting them that does not also entail confronting the market. Similarly, contemporary movements that base themselves around antiracist demands, like Black Lives Matter, have shown that they can be consistent with, and indeed an expression of, a broader radicalization that is also directed against American capitalism.

Reed is right to argue that we need more political economy and class analysis in both our discussions of race in America and today’s oppositional movements. But his recent interventions do little to advance that goal.

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<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/10/adolph-reed-blm-racism-capitalism-labor>

Identity Politics Can Only Get Us So Far

Let's give identity politics its due, but let's also be clear about why we need universalist politics.



Women's liberation march, 1970. Library of Congress / Wikimedia

I first encountered the assertion that “all politics is identity politics” some time in the 1990s. The claim seemed tailor-made for that decade, when Judith Butler was portraying all identity as performance and politics as a slow, staid, and distinctly non-revolutionary adjustment of social norms.

This idea has persisted, no doubt because the wider political conjuncture that shaped it still remains in force. It reverberates in current debates about the 2016 election and in discussions about the relationship between post-1960s social movements and a renewed socialist left.

At first glance, the idea looks like a useful shorthand for how politics really works. For instance, in *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson showed how a certain kind of identity shaped the modern world. After Gutenberg, books, newspapers, schools, and other emergent institutions undermined ancient axioms, coaxed people to join different communities, and thus prepared the ground for the spread of nationalism and the rise of nation states.

Likewise, we might read Karl Marx as an identity-politics theorist. When his followers define class consciousness as the development of a class-in-itself into a class-for-itself, they effectively describe a process whereby members of a class become aware of themselves *as* a class and forge a collective identity.

However, categorizing Anderson and Marx as identity thinkers misrepresents their work. Anderson does not base his analysis on general assertions about the timeless mechanisms of identity formation. Rather, he takes converging political-economic factors — especially the rise of what he calls print capitalism — into meticulous account.

And, as E. P. Thompson suggested [30], aligning class consciousness with identity abstracts class from the historical conditions and struggles of its production.

“Once this [approach] is assumed it becomes possible to deduce the class-consciousness which “it” [the working class] ought to have (but seldom does have) if “it” was properly aware of its own position and real interests. There is a cultural superstructure, through which this recognition dawns in inefficient ways. These cultural “lags” and distortions are a nuisance, so that it is easy to pass from this to some theory of substitution: the party, sect, or theorist, who disclose class-consciousness, not as it is, but as it ought to be.”

In fact, the claim that all politics is about identity is so general that observers can use it to give a flyover view of almost any political phenomenon. After all, every movement positions an “us” against a “them” and builds support by enlisting people to join a group and to *identify* with a cause.

That this assertion can apply to so many cases is not a strength. The paradigm rejects an analysis of the particular in order to feign expertise in the general, erases the historical specificities of given struggles and movements, and paints everything with the same brush.

Weaponized Identities

A scrupulous review of what socialist and working-class movements have usually demanded — universal health care, free education, public housing, democratic control of the means of production — doesn't easily square with how identity politics are typically understood. In its strictest sense, identity politics describes how marginalized people embrace previously stigmatized identities, create communities on the basis of shared attributes and interests (which are typically held to be essential and unchanging), and rally either for autonomy or for rights and recognitions. I would take this argument a step further and say that even the new left social movements that gave birth to the term identity politics have not always fit this mold.

Consider the gay movement. In its late-1960s upsurge, gay politics had less to do with the pageantry of identity than with urgent demands to end violence and oppression. Activists first called for the cops to get out of our bars, the institutions to get off of our backs, and the shrinks to get out of our lives.

Identity comes up early, of course, usually in discussions of coming out. In this context, however, activists gave no hint of seeking what Nancy Fraser calls "recognition," nor did they reify homosexuality as a person's unchanging essence.

Surveying his research on the early history of gay liberation, Henry Abelove argues that today [\[31\]](#), blinkered by post-Stonewall preconceptions, we fundamentally misunderstand the relationship early gay activists had to identity. "I find little to suggest," he writes, "that [the early liberationists] saw coming out as the result of a truth-seeking journey deep into a supposed interior self. They thought of it rather as a release from a quite deliberately assumed reticence." That is, they considered publicly identifying as gay as an "indispensable means" for building a political movement, a gentle and persistent weaponization of the individual in homosexuals' collective struggles.

Among other things, this means that the liberationists generally took a dialectical approach to sexual categories. From the start, they maintained that labels like heterosexual and homosexual would be cast aside after liberation.

Carl Wittman's influential broadside, "A Gay Manifesto," [\[32\]](#) published in 1970 by the Red Butterfly brigade of the Gay Liberation Front, gives us useful insight into the early militants' thinking. Far from celebrating the gay ghetto, Wittman treats San Francisco as a "refugee camp." Rejecting gay marriage as a political goal, he calls instead for alternatives to matrimony. And while stressing the political necessity of coming out, Wittman underscores the tentativeness of identity with glances at a liberated, bisexual future: "We'll be gay until everyone has forgotten that it's an issue." Likewise, Dennis Altman's 1971 polemic, *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation* [\[33\]](#), concludes with a chapter titled "The End of the Homosexual."

Under the rubric of *liberation*, activists embraced identity in order to abolish it. Marxist ideas about class struggle — which similarly culminate with the abolition of social classes — influenced their ideas. They rallied around demands for adequate income, housing, medical care, ecological well-being, and meaningful employment. Their liberation struggle was ultimately a revolutionary call to action with a universalist view of freedom.

The turn to identity as the key political trope, as well as the whittling-back of demands to fit this

narrower concept, came in the wake of the original political upsurge, as urban gay communities were growing, as *gay* was emerging as a niche market, and when the political discourse shifted from social to personal liberation. In this context, increasingly reified identities would step out of closets to claim their rights, each vying for recognition under increasingly elaborate acronyms. A complex history of separatisms, nationalisms, and intersectionalities follows.

Universal Liberation

All of the new left social movements trace similar trajectories. Over the course of the 1970s, the women's movement, the black movement, and the gay movement all retreated from their original, radical outlooks to take on essentially liberal worldviews. As political imaginaries contracted, each began to dwell more comfortably in the house of identity. This process dovetailed with post-Fordism's and neoliberalism's new forms of lifestyle consumerism. Periodic upsurges in radicalism occasionally interrupted this trend, but these outbreaks were quieted, domesticated, and reabsorbed back into the main movement.

Identity politics, from this perspective, is neither coterminous with politics nor the form invariably taken by new left social movements; rather, it describes the form that these movements took under changing circumstances.

This evolution has had important results. We owe the fact that the United States has become more tolerant and inclusive to identity politics' successes and to the liberal reforms they have won.

But this kind of political engagement has failed to address the types of social inequalities around which earlier liberationists centered their activism. And now, as class inequalities have dilated, establishment politicians ally with identity groups to shore up neoliberalism against any resistance to it.

Let's give identity politics its due but let's also be clear about its limitations. We can learn from the past, but not from potted histories that make terms like identity into abstractions. And we deceive ourselves if we think the path forward will involve the accumulation of minorities into a majority, the mere amalgamation of pre-constructed identities into a socialist movement.

The Left must now discover how to win over the publics currently being represented by identity brokers with an inclusive and universalist socialist program.

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* Jacobin. 08.03.2017:

<https://jacobinmag.com/2017/08/identity-politics-gay-rights-neoliberalism-stonewall-feminism-race>

When a “universal” approach narrows the fight

David Camfield, a socialist activist in Winnipeg and author of *We Can Do Better: Ideas for*

Changing Society, comments on a discussion on the left about the place of struggles against oppression in the fight for socialism.



Sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, fighting for civil rights and union rights in 1968

IT'S GREAT that more people on the U.S. left are embracing a politics of social class. But too many supporters of class politics still argue as if working-class struggle is separate from struggles against sexism, racism and other forms of oppression, or treat struggles against oppression as not all that important.

We can see this in the way some on the left criticize “identity politics.” In the wake of Donald Trump’s win, Bernie Sanders’ call to “go beyond identity politics” got lots of attention [34]. Writing in *Jacobin* that “Identity politics can only get us so far,” [see above] Roger Lancaster argues for “an inclusive and universalist socialist program” because of the limits of demands by communities of “marginalized people” “for autonomy or for rights and recognitions.”

Similar arguments crop up in other countries too; it’s not just a U.S. thing. But it’s time for people on the left to stop arguing about “identity politics” in this way.

The first problem is that the meaning of “identity politics” is far from clear.

As Richard Seymour helpfully notes [35], the right uses the term to mean “any concession whatsoever to the idea that anyone other than white bourgeois men are ‘created equal.’” Used this way, it’s “part of a whole vocabulary including ‘thought police,’ ‘politically correct,’ and ‘liberal elites,’ whose main intention is to undermine the legitimacy of liberal and left politics,” as Linda Burnham argues [36].

Seymour adds that “a wing of the liberal center” uses “identity politics” “to criticize what they think of as the overly clamorous and over-hasty demands of women, gays, African-Americans, migrants and others for justice.”

These meanings propagated in the mainstream media are *by far* the most influential ways the term is understood. No wonder, then, that some people who experience racism, sexism, heterosexism and other forms of oppression identify “identity politics” with their struggles against the specific ways in which they’re harmed.

This is reason enough for people who mean something different than these understandings of “identity politics” to find another way of talking about it. “Identity politics” isn’t like “working class” or “socialism”—terms with highly contested meanings that we have to stick with because today we don’t have better words to use to communicate these ideas.

BUT THE problem goes a lot deeper than terminology. Sanders called for Democratic candidates—“Black and white and Latino and gay and male”—with the “guts to stand up to the oligarchy,” who will “stand with...working people,” who understand how many people’s income and life expectancy are declining, and who get that many people can’t afford health care and college.

Lancaster is more radical: he praises the “original, radical outlooks” of the Black, women’s and gay and lesbian movements of the 1960s and 1970s. However, the content of the “inclusive and universalist socialist program” he contrasts with “identity politics” isn’t clear. He observes that what “socialist and working-class movements have usually demanded” are such things as “universal health care, free education, public housing, democratic control of the means of production.”

What both these lines of argument have in common is the idea that the left should champion a universalist politics instead of “identity politics”—and that universalist politics don’t include demands directed *specifically* against racism, sexism, heterosexism, settler-colonialism and other kinds of oppression.

Action against gender violence, free contraception, free abortion on demand, free public child care, a federal and state jobs program for economically marginalized Black people, permanent resident status for all immigrants, full legal equality for queer and trans people, self-determination for indigenous nations – these and other reforms to weaken oppression are downplayed or sometimes even excluded as “particular” “identity” demands.

This approach “not only presumes that class struggle is some sort of race- and gender-neutral terrain but takes for granted that movements focused on race, gender or sexuality necessarily undermine class unity and, by definition, cannot be emancipatory for the whole,” as Robin D.G. Kelley argued 20 years ago [37].

The history of struggles against oppression disproves those notions. The abolition of slavery in the U.S. inspired organizers for the rights of wage workers and women. “As slaves acted to change things for themselves, horizons broadened for almost everyone,” notes David Roediger [38].

The liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s loosened the grip of ruling-class ideology on U.S. society and influenced some of the broader struggles of workers and students of the time. The May 1 “Day Without Immigrants” protests of Latinx people in 2006 showed that political strike action is possible in the U.S.

Today, Black Lives Matter is encouraging some people who don’t experience racism to organize and fight for change. As we saw at Standing Rock, Indigenous land defenders are mounting some of the most effective resistance to capitalist energy industry projects that would make climate change even worse and contaminate water sources.

This history demonstrates that the freedom struggles of the oppressed can advance unity among workers by chipping away at material inequalities and reactionary ideas that divide the class. They’ve shown other people the power of militant collective action.

They’ve also inspired some who receive relative advantages because others are oppressed—men, white people, straights—to question our role and join in the struggle, leading us to recognize that perpetuating oppression is wrong and strengthens our enemies, and that these movements are ultimately about our freedom, too, as many of the demands in the platform of the Movement for Black Lives make clear [39].

YES, SOCIALISTS need to fight for demands like free education, dramatic action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions along with a just transition for workers negatively affected, and single-payer health care in the U.S.

But for socialist politics to be truly universal, they have to do more than advance such demands and link them to a vision of transforming society. We must also propose measures that specifically target different forms of oppression. That’s the best way to put the old workers’ movement slogan “An

injury to one is an injury to all” into practice today.

To shy away from such measures because they’re unpopular among some of the people we want to organize is to avoid the hard work involved in forging unity in societies in which the working class is deeply divided and oppression is still very real in spite of gains in legal rights and cultural norms.

When carpenters union officials report workers without status to ICE [40]; when many union leaders were on the wrong side at Standing Rock [41]; when many white people act as if people of color are a threat to them; and when cis women and trans people are routinely denied control over their bodies; “race-blind” and “gender-blind” politics won’t help us get where we need to go.

Unity built on the foundation of such politics will be fragile and shallow. It will always remain vulnerable to divide-and-conquer tactics used by employers and politicians.

None of this means that a politics whose aspirations for oppressed people don’t go much beyond cultural recognition and fair representation in the power structure of neoliberal capitalism aren’t a problem. They are, as the records of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton reveal so clearly.

Some supporters of these politics opportunistically use insinuations about Sanders and “Bernie Bros” being supposedly hostile to women and Black people to smear anyone who criticizes the Democratic Party establishment from the left. But attacks on “identity politics” in the name of a “universalism” that underestimates the importance of oppression [42] or that doesn’t explicitly take on oppression in every form aren’t the way to persuade people swayed by that kind of liberalism to embrace socialist politics.

David Camfield

* Socialist Worker. August 14, 2017:

<https://socialistworker.org/2017/08/14/when-a-universal-approach-narrows-the-fight>

Footnotes

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